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ABSTRACT

Teaching about law-related education (LRE) in elementary and secondary schools is an important social studies trend. This ERIC Digest considers: (1) the meaning of law-related education; (2) reasons for including LRE in the curriculum; (3) methods of incorporating LRE into a curriculum; and (4) characteristics of effective LRE programs. Education for citizenship in a constitutional democracy is the primary goal of LRE. Reasons for including LRE in a curriculum are the: (1) development of knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed for citizenship; (2) prevention of delinquency; (3) growth of student interest in social studies; and (4) provision of breadth and depth in social studies education. Special events, units, specific courses, or the infusion of LRE into already-established courses can be used to implement LRE into the curriculum. The characteristics of an effective LRE program include: (1) extensive student interaction; (2) course content that involves a balanced treatment of issues; (3) the use of outside resource persons; (4) strong school administrative support; and (5) systematic staff development. Student growth in both knowledge and character should be stressed. A seven-item bibliography is included. (JHP)

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June 1988

by

Carolyn Pereira

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Law-Related Education in Elementary and Secondary Schools

by Carolyn Pereira

Law-related education (LRE) in elementary and secondary schools has grown remarkably since the 1970s. A nationwide curriculum survey (Hahn 1985) reveals that, since 1975, LRE has been added to the curriculum in more than half of the forty-six states involved in the study. Respondents in Hahn's study (state-level curriculum specialists and supervisors) mentioned LRE more frequently than any other curriculum theme as new to the social studies program since 1975. They also ranked LRE fourth as a priority in social studies education; it ranked eleventh in 1975.

It appears that teaching and learning about law in elementary and secondary schools is an important trend in social studies education. This ERIC Digest treats (1) the meaning of law-related education, (2) reasons for including LRE in the curriculum, (3) ways to include LRE in the curriculum, and (4) characteristics of effective LRE programs in elementary and secondary schools.

What Is Law-Related Education? Education for citizenship in a constitutional democracy, not specialized legal education, is the main point of LRE in elementary and secondary schools. Given the fundamental place of law in our American society, every citizen needs to know how the legal and political systems function, how the law affects them, and how they can affect it.

In 1978, major leaders in LRE described their field for a federal government report. They defined LRE as "those organized learning experiences that provide students and educators with opportunities to develop the knowledge and understanding, skills, attitudes and appreciations necessary to respond effectively to the law and legal issues in our complex and changing society" (Study Group on Law-Related Education 1978). In line with this definition, central ideas of LRE programs pertain to why certain legal procedures have been established and how they work in resolving disputes.

Why Should LRE Be Included in the Social Studies Curriculum? Four reasons for including LRE in the curriculum are (1) development of knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed for citizenship, (2) prevention of delinquency, (3) growth of student interest in the social studies, and (4) provision of breadth and depth to education in the social studies.

1. *Development of Citizenship.* Law-related education provides young people with knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for informed, responsible participation in our American constitutional democracy. LRE clearly and indisputably increases students' knowledge of the justice system, government, and the rights and responsibilities of citizenship in a constitutional democracy. There also is evidence that LRE contributes to development of skills in civic participation, decision making, and critical thinking. Finally, positive attitudes about the law, the justice system, and responsible citizenship may be enhanced through LRE programs. (Hunter 1987).

2. *Prevention of Delinquency.* A study conducted by the Social Science Education Consortium and the Center for Action Research indicates that LRE programs, when properly conducted, can reduce tendencies toward delinquent behavior and improve a range of attitudes related to responsible citizenship (Little and Haley 1982). For example, successful students of LRE programs are less likely to associate with delinquent peers, use violence as a means of resolving conflict, and refrain from reporting criminal behavior to authorities.

3. *Growth of Student Interest in the Social Studies.* Content of LRE programs is directly related to the lives of students. The variety of interactive methods of instruction (e.g., small group work, mock trials, simulations, case studies) seem to involve students positively in the learning process. Thus, law-related educators tend to report that students seem to "value LRE classes as relevant, useful, and interesting; that the classroom interaction is rewarding—offering students who had difficulties mastering the subject matter of other courses opportunities to participate successfully" (Hunter 1987, 55). Heightened interest and positive attitudes of students in LRE programs may transfer to other courses in the social studies.

4. *Provision of Breadth and Depth to Education in the Social Studies.* Law-related concepts and facts are necessary to the understanding of history, government, and economics—subjects that are integral to education in the social studies in elementary and secondary schools. Sources of law, functions of law, legal processes, legal roles, and legal principles (e.g., justice, equality, authority, freedom, order, etc.) are essential elements of the social studies curriculum. Thus, LRE is a necessary component of a sound social studies curriculum.

How Does LRE Fit into the Curriculum? There are three obvious approaches to inclusion of LRE in the curriculum (Naylor 1984):

- Use of special events about the law.
- The special unit or course on LRE.
- Infusion of LRE into various standard courses.

Special events, such as Law Day, annually provide opportunities to draw attention to LRE and to provide special programs. Teachers might invite lawyers to participate in classroom or school-

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wide activities. Other special events include mock trial competitions, field trips to courtrooms, and essay contests.

A separate unit or course on LRE is often included in the secondary school curriculum. Separate units typically appear in government and civics courses. Law and citizenship courses are also offered as electives in many schools. In some schools, there is a required LRE course. Separate units on law are often found at various levels in the social studies curriculum of elementary schools.

The infusion of LRE into standard courses in the social studies is common. Courses in American history, world history, and government are the most likely subjects for infusion of significant content about the law.

Over the short term, it appears that a semester course on LRE makes a positive difference in knowledge, skills, and attitudes. However, some law-related educators believe that the preferred approach is systematic infusion; they contend that a carefully-integrated strand of LRE throughout the elementary and secondary curriculum will yield the best results in terms of the quantity and quality of instruction.

What are the Characteristics of Effective LRE Programs? Effective LRE programs are distinguished by at least five characteristics, which are listed below.

1. *Extensive Interaction Among Students.* Teaching strategies that foster interactive and cooperative learning among students are keys to development of civic participation skills and positive attitudes about LRE and responsible citizenship (Slavin 1980). Examples of these teaching strategies are small group work, simulations, role-play activities, and mock trials.

2. *Realistic Content that Includes Balanced Treatment of Issues.* Realistic and fair treatment of issues is an essential component of effective law-related education. So is critical thinking about all sides to controversies. If our legal system is presented as flawless or infallible, students will doubt the credibility of the teacher and the practicality of the content. By contrast, if only cases in which the system has failed are presented, students will be less likely to view the law as a positive tool for maintaining social order and justice. A balance should be sought between respect for the law and constructive criticism about its application in specific cases. There should also be a balanced treatment of all sides to issues in legal cases.

3. *Use of Outside Resource Persons in the Classroom.* Interaction with a variety of adult role models who work within our legal system adds credibility and reality to the curriculum and is a powerful influence on development of positive student attitudes toward the law. Appropriate use of resource persons in the classroom (e.g., lawyers, judges, police officers, legislators, etc.) is strongly associated with increased student interest in LRE, positive responses to teachers and the school, and shifts from delinquent to nondelinquent peer associations. Of course, these adult role models should exhibit behaviors sought in students and be prepared in advance to make contributions to the course that are consistent with the objectives of LRE.

4. *Strong Support for LRE by the Principal and Other Important School Administrators.* A key to successful implementation of LRE in schools is strong support by administrators, especially the school principal. Supportive administrators can aid LRE by organizing opportunities for peer support, rewarding teachers for outstanding work, helping teachers explain and justify the LRE program to people in the community outside the school, and providing opportunities for staff development in knowledge and skills needed to carry out LRE programs. It is difficult or impossible to establish a worthwhile LRE program in the face of indifference or opposition by important school administrators.

5. *Systematic Staff Development in LRE.* The effectiveness of LRE programs depends upon the knowledge and skill of teachers. In addition, positive attitudes about LRE on the part of teachers and their colleagues are very important to successful implementation of LRE in a school. Development of necessary knowledge, skills, and attitudes among teachers can be achieved through systematic and extensive staff development activities. Successful staff development programs provide these benefits to teachers:

- An understanding of and commitment to the rationale, goals, and objectives of LRE.
- Experiences in working with high-quality lessons so that they understand how and why they work.
- Practice in evaluating and modifying materials to gain skill in selecting and adapting content and methods to fit local educational objectives.
- Practice in teaching strategies associated with successful LRE programs.
- Opportunities for constructive "feedback" about performances in teacher training sessions.

In conclusion, successful LRE programs involve students actively in the learning process in ways that reflect a high regard for each person. Reflection, deliberation, and discourse are valued and practiced systematically. And the development of knowledge and character are pursued in concert, as equally important elements of responsible citizenship in our constitutional democracy.

References and ERIC Resources

Following is a list of resources including references used to prepare this Digest. Those items followed by an ED number are in the ERIC system and are available in microfiche and/or paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, write EDRS, 1900 Wheeler Avenue, Alexandria, Virginia 22304 or call 1-800-227-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number are annotated monthly in CIJE (*Current Index to Journals in Education*) which is available in most libraries. EJ documents are not available through EDRS; however, they can be located in the journal section of most libraries using the bibliographic information provided below.

Gallagher, Arlene F. "How Law-Related Education Fits Into the Curriculum." THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF SOCIAL EDUCATION 2 (Autumn 1987): 37-44. EJ number will be assigned.

Hahn, Carole L. "The Status of the Social Studies in Public Schools of the United States: Another Look." SOCIAL EDUCATION 49 (March 1985): 220-223. EJ 315 999.

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